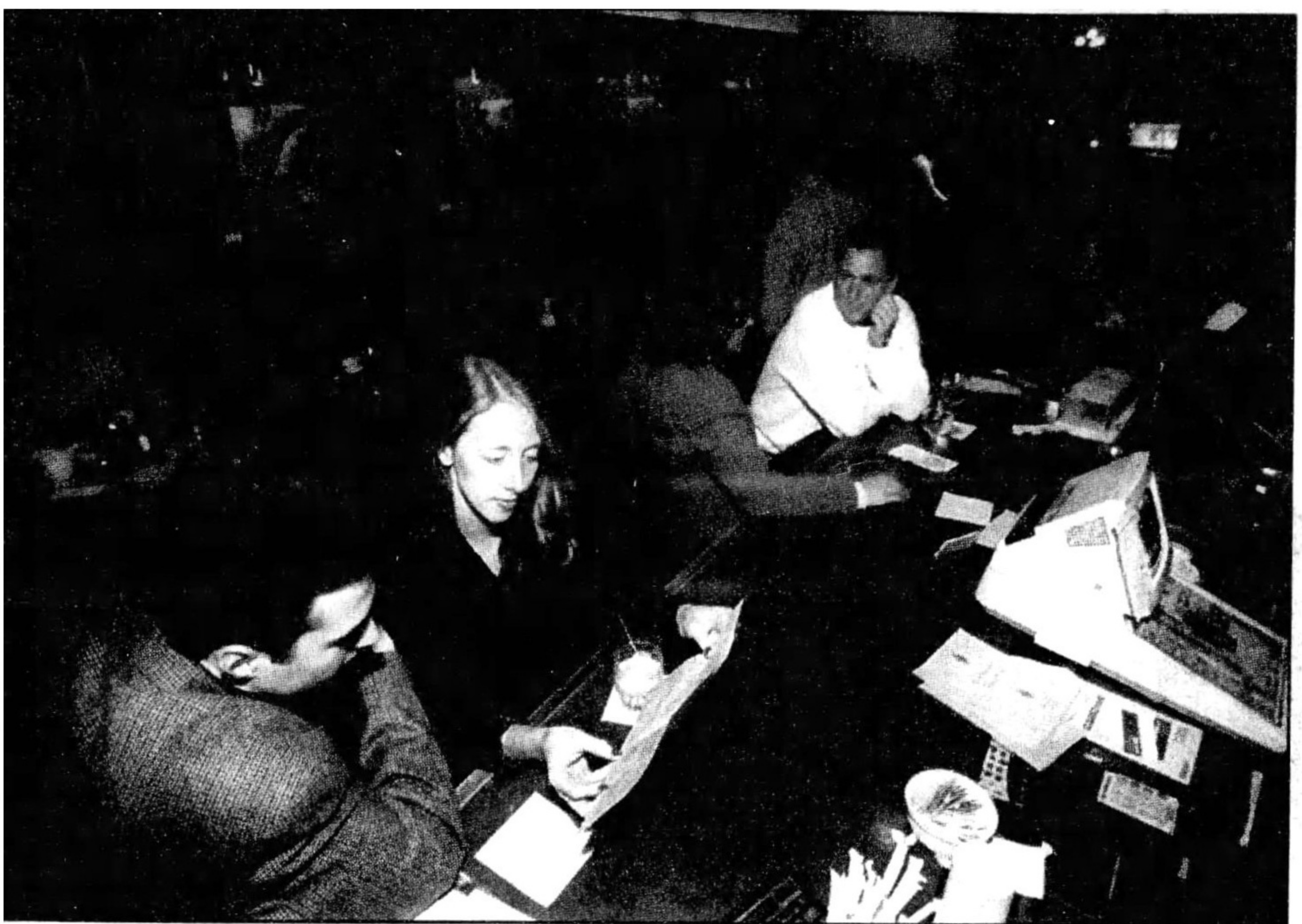




Photos by CELINE BUFKIN / Staff

Jennifer Boyens and William Victor (foreground) sit at the bar at Churchill Grounds.

THE SCENE

A. SCOTT WALTON

Coffee, cigars and a touch of class

It pained pianist Johnny O'Neal every time someone breezed into downtown's new coffee-and-cigar bar Churchill Grounds last Saturday night. As O'Neal would inform me during one of his refreshment breaks, some affliction akin to bursitis was firing go-home-and-rest distress signals through his right wrist and shoulders. The fact that his piano was positioned to take direct hits of icy air whenever the front door opened didn't help matters much.

Besides that, each incremental rise in attendance at Churchill Grounds meant that much more effort O'Neal had to exert to be heard over the talkative crowd. The fact that his drummer hadn't shown up to round out the Johnny O'Neal Trio didn't help matters much.

Though Churchill Grounds swelled from half empty to all full once the Morrissey concert let out next door at the Fox Theatre, the same thing couldn't be said for the tip jar placed prominently on O'Neal's piano. The fact that O.J. Simpson prosecutor Christopher Darden sat for a while Saturday at a table an arm's length from the piano didn't help matters much.

O'Neal — whose repertoire of off-color jokes could be as extensive as the list of jazz melodies he's committed to memory — performs Tuesdays through Saturdays at Churchill Grounds. Accompanied by a laid-back bassist Saturday, he sang and played standards such as "Falling in Love With Love," "You Go to My Head" and "Pennies From Heaven."

You ought to drop in and catch his act sometime. Just remember to close the door behind you.

■ **The look, the feel:** Churchill Grounds is a one-room, shotgun-style establishment roughly 15-by-45-feet. Its coziness can border on overcrowdedness. Its brown, black and tan color scheme ties in nicely with the cigar-coffee drink theme. It offers three seating selections: the Lilliputian lounge area just to



Phyllis Rix belts out a tune with the Johnny O'Neal Trio, featuring O'Neal on piano and Tarus Mateen on bass.

REVIEW

Churchill Grounds

660 Peachtree St. N.E.,
404-876-3030

the left of the entryway, the bar that eats up half the left side's floor space and the upholstered bench seating that lines the lion's share of the right wall. Rich inlaid wood lends the place its air of dignity. The liquor racks, coffee machines and bean bins run flush against the left wall. A half-dozen cubist paintings by William Etheridge are displayed lovingly on the right. The French version of saxophonist Dexter Gordon's life story, "Round Midnight," was showing on the video monitor above the bar when I arrived. Once that ended, someone popped in a tape of Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn's "Funny Face."

■ **The service:** Distinguishing the hip, young waiters from the hip, young patrons wasn't easy because everyone hovering around the bar was in dark designer clothing. It shaped up to be a "we'll get to you when we get to you" arrangement, with four servers handling my table in the course of a few hours. Orders were filled with commendable speed. I asked for matches to light my Arturo Fuente Grand Reserve,

and the waiter brought me a box of nice wooden ones and in a flash produced a cutter in a stylish black lacquer design. Since he seemed a man of discriminating tastes, I asked him to select a bourbon for me as a nightcap. He returned with a snifter of small batch Knob Creek — "full-bodied but not too overpowering," he explained — with a matching snifter of "rocks" on the side.

■ **The menu:** For something to gnaw on, choose from the almond chicken, ham, roast beef and roasted veggie sandwiches on focaccia (\$5-\$5.50). Potato, pasta, cucumber and fruit salads are offered in small (\$2.50) and large (\$4.50) sizes. There are nine coffee drinks (\$1.50-\$3) to choose from, as well as a healthy sampling of teas (\$2) and a dozen desserts (\$1.75-\$4.50). Wines are available by the bottle (\$22-\$60) or glass (\$5-\$8.75) and beers are \$4-\$7. The back page of Churchill Grounds' menu lists and describes the 11 available cigars (\$7-\$18.50) of Honduran, Dominican, Nicaraguan and American origin.

■ **Cover charge:** Yes. \$5.

Have nightlife questions or tips? Call A. Scott Walton at 404-526-5673.

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